

Iran: Workers' Organizations and 'Woman, Life, Freedom': A Bottom-Up Solidarity in Making

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On February 15th, twenty workers' unions, feminists, students, and one human rights organization in Iran published the [Charter of Minimum Demands of Independent Civil and Trade Unions of Iran](#), the first collective document from within the country, voicing their demands for a democratic and just future without dictatorship and oppression. Eighteen organizations, primarily students and university student organizations, also joined to support the Charter on February 21st. However, there are critics of the Charter regarding how they gathered endorsements without giving adequate time to large important unions such as the Syndicate of Workers of Tehran and Suburbs Bus Company to discuss it with members and provide their input. Generally, though, the Charter has initiated important conversations and promoted engagement within the working class and beyond in Iran and the diaspora.

The Charter makes twelve demands. These demands are presented as the minimum bar, open for discussion and further development by different social groups and movements. Starting with an emphasis on the social revolution that aims for people's freedom from all forms of oppression, discrimination, exploitation, and dictatorships, these demands replicate the core revolutionary principles of 'Woman, life, freedom,' which I explain below.

Transformative Moment in Iranian Politics

Besides the strong demand for ending executions in Iran and freeing all political prisoners, which are non-negotiable principles, there are four areas that the Charter brings up and that would be transformative for Iranian society: establishing bottom-up change, starting the conversation on LGBTQ+ communities' rights within the workers' movement, as well as conversations about worker's rights and the rights of communities with different backgrounds in marginalized regions, and finally, emphasizing environmental restoration. This Charter represents a transformative moment in Iranian politics and social movements.

First, the Charter opposes any representative group that favours top-down solutions for the future of Iran. For example, the societal elite who claim they want regime change have asked us to put our differences aside, become fictitiously homogenous, and let them represent us and probably decide what is best for the people. Many see this as a right-wing cooptation of the revolution. While this elite group's commitment lies with a regime change project, they have chosen the path of negotiating with world powers and keeping in place many power structures of the Islamic Republic of Iran. On the other hand, the 'Woman, Life, Freedom' revolution includes regime change, but goes way beyond that; it calls for destroying every pillar of dictatorship in favour of the communities that have been oppressed for decades by previous power relations.

As a path committed to the 'Woman, Life, Freedom' revolution, the Charter provides the necessary ground for radical revolutionary changes in Iran based on solidarity among various social movements within the country. At the same time, it provides a platform to connect the movements inside and outside of Iran, apart from the right-wing top-down approaches and their threat to hijack the uprising.

The Charter reminds us of the continuation of incredible resistance from the ground. The uprising for 'Woman, Life, Freedom' wasn't an isolated event but stood on the shoulders of many previous uprisings and social movements such as feminist movements, farmers' and workers' strikes, union organizers, Kurdish resistance, teachers' movements, student movements and so on.

It remains committed to the central issues of the 'Woman, Life, Freedom' uprising, the issues of women and marginalized ethnicities, and reminds us that meaningful solidarity comes from accepting the differences while criticizing the power relations and hierarchy of identities imposed on us through different processes of marginalization and state narratives of nationalism, patriarchy, and violence.

Sex and Gender Rights

Second, the Charter recognizes the existence and rights of people of different sexualities. This might be the first time that the rights of LGBTQ+ communities have entered the collective narrative of many groups from Iran. During the uprising, the 'Woman, Life, Freedom' chant went beyond itself and entered the queer narrative into the consciousness of many as the chant symbolized decades of oppression and state violence on the bodies of women and queer people, for example, mandatory hijab, which goes hand in hand with discriminatory laws and daily police violence as well as systemic discrimination and exclusion from the public. These laws take control over their bodies away from women and queer communities and criminalize non-heteronormative sexualities and genders.

In addition, they impose gender segregation in education and in many occupations to the extent that women are banned or discouraged from taking many jobs considered to be in the male dominion. The result has been systematized oppression against women and LGBTQ+, forcing them into feminized lower-paid work and, in many cases, entirely outside of waged labour and into subsistence work and further into poverty.

This solidarity from the coalition dominated by labour movements and organizations is significant, but criticisms of the Charter are also important, such as concerns about the exclusion of people of different genders in the narrative, showing a lack of consultation with the LGBTQ+ groups. In fact, radical justice also includes recognition of these groups not as an end but as a step that leads to participation, distribution, and creation of institutional possibilities for marginalized groups on the path to self-determination.

Freedom and Equality for All

Third, the Charter brings in broad sets of demands that might look separate but are related to the principles of freedom and equality for all, which are the basis for a democratic society. Some of these demands are for the workers' health and safety, job security, and raising workers' salaries, alongside distributive justice for all regions, including the right to study in the native tongue. In addition, it calls for a ban on child labour and the provision of unemployment insurance, free education, and healthcare for everyone. Each of these points is necessary for a dignified life as indicated by the revolution's main slogan's second word, "life."

The system that allows [Jina Amini](#) to be kidnapped and killed by morality police just for her

appearance is the same system that creates the state narrative of nationalism that normalizes extremely murderous violence in some of the border cities such as Kurdistan and Baluchistan. It is also the same system that cannot tolerate independent workers and union organizations in Iran. For example, the Iranian state has imposed decades of oppression against independent workers' unions, leading to the imprisonment of many union organizers in Iran, brutal suppression of strikes and striking workers, and allowing their employers to indiscriminately fire and replace them. At the same time, we need to pay attention to the situation of those working people who can find no place in the official labour force and are pushed into "criminalized" work due to living in the peripheral regions, such as in Kurdistan and Baluchistan. These regions have been systematically kept underdeveloped and have suffered imposed poverty under Iran's monarchist and Islamic regimes.

An example of criminalized work is the transporting of fuel between borders that are called Sookhtbari, which became the primary source of income for many Baluchis families when there were no other opportunities. Those workers are in extreme danger of being shot, and having the commodities being stolen or destroyed by the government or. Just last week, the Iranian state's armed forces shot at two vehicles that then exploded, burning five Baluchis to death. The situation is similar in another context, Kurdistan, with Koolbari, an imposed livelihood that is the only way to earn money. But because of the narrative of nationalism and borders, those deaths are supposed to be normalized for us.

Last but not least, the Charter addresses the issue of environmental restoration and sustainability. Iran is currently facing drought caused by climate change and mismanagement of its water sources. The country's natural resources are suffering from unsustainable forms of development that prioritizes major industries over local and traditional forms of water management for rural areas, farming, or marginalized regions. This has put pressure on other ethnic minorities in Iran, such as Arab farmers and has led to mass displacements, while providing large corporations the opportunity to accumulate the lands left behind. Opening a serious conversation on this topic should also include recognizing the communities' right to self-determination through participatory democracy and sovereignty over the natural resources in their regions in order to provide community-based solutions for environmental disasters.

In the end, when we fight for the death of dictatorship in Iran alongside 'Woman, Life, Freedom,' we hope for a new democratic society with a revolutionary approach to social relations of power that includes equity, freedom and life with dignity. That will only be possible through empowering social groups and communities to decide for themselves and create systems of participatory democracy. The multitude and plurality of communities and their issues will be solved and entered into our radical imagination if we start addressing them now, no matter how limited or flawed.

Charter of Minimum Demands

To the noble and free people of Iran!

On the 44th anniversary of the 1979 revolution, Iran is facing an economic, political and social crisis that has engulfed the country and a clear and achievable vision to end it is unimaginable within the existing political framework.

Therefore, the oppressed people of Iran, including freedom-loving and equality-seeking women and youths, have turned the streets of the cities across the country into the center of a historic and decisive struggle to end the existing inhumane situation.

Despite the bloody repression by the government, they have not rested for a moment for the past

five months.

The fundamental protests raised today by women, students, teachers, workers, activists, artists, writers and the oppressed people of Iran in general in various parts of the country, from Kurdistan to Sistan and Baluchistan [provinces], is a protest against misogyny, gender discrimination, endless economic insecurity, labor slavery, poverty, misery, class oppression, ethnic and religious oppression, and a revolution against every form of religious and non-religious tyranny that has been imposed over the past century.

These protests have emerged from the context of large and modern social movements and the rise of an invincible generation that is determined to put an end to the history of a hundred years of backwardness and marginalization of the ideal of a modern, prosperous and free society in Iran.

After the two great revolutions in Iran's modern history, the leading social movements, including the labor movement, the movement of teachers and pensioners, the movement for equality for women, students and youth, and the movement against the death penalty, etc., have had a historical and decisive influence in shaping the political, economic and social structure of the country.

Therefore, this movement aims to end forever the formation of any power from above and be the beginning of a social, modern and human revolution to free the people from all forms of oppression, discrimination, exploitation, tyranny, and dictatorship.

We, the union and civic organizations and institutions that signed this charter, focusing on the unity and interconnection of the social movements and demands and focusing on the struggle to end the existing inhumane and destructive situation, consider the following minimum demands as the first steps to meet the demands of these fundamental protests.

The people of Iran consider that meeting these minimum demands is the only way to build a new, modern and humane society in the country, and we ask all the noble people who have freedom, equality, and liberation in their hearts, from factories to universities, schools, and neighborhoods to raise the flag of these minimum demands.

1. Immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners, prohibition of criminalizing political, union, and civil activities, and public trials for those responsible for suppressing popular protests.
2. Unconditional freedom of opinion, expression, thought, [political] parties, local and national trade unions, popular organizations, gatherings, strikes, marches, social networks and the media.
3. Immediate cancellation of the issuance and execution of any type of death penalty and retribution, and prohibition of any type of mental and physical torture.
4. Immediate and full equality of rights between women men in all political, economic, social, cultural and family spheres, unconditional abolition of discriminatory laws against sexual and gender relations and tendencies, recognition of the rainbow society LGBTQIA+, decriminalization of all gender relations and tendencies, unconditional adherence to all women's rights over their bodies and destiny and preventing patriarchal control.
5. Religion is a private matter of the individuals and should not interfere in the political, economic, social, and cultural destiny and laws of the country.
6. Ensure work safety, job security and an immediate increase in the salaries of workers, teachers and employees, whether they are still active or retired, with the involvement and agreement of elected union representatives.
7. Abolish laws and any behavior based on ethnic or religious discrimination and oppression, establish appropriate supporting infrastructures as well as the fair and equal distribution of

government resources for the growth of culture and art in all regions of the country and provide the necessary and equal facilities for the learning and teaching of all languages used in society.

8. Limit the influence of the government and grant people the right to interfere in local and national councils directly and permanently. Dismissing any government or non-government official by voters at any time should be among the voters' fundamental rights.
9. Confiscate the properties of the individuals and governmental, semi-governmental and private institutions that have taken the property and social wealth of the Iranian people hostage through direct looting or government rent. The wealth obtained from these confiscations should be immediately used to modernize and reconstruct education, pension funds, the environment, and the needs of the regions and Iranians who have been deprived and had fewer facilities under the regimes of the Islamic Republic and the monarchy.
10. End environmental destruction, implement policies to revive the environmental infrastructure that has been destroyed over the past hundred years and publicize the natural areas that have been privatized (such as pastures, beaches, forests, and foothills), depriving the people's rights on them.
11. Prohibit children's work and provide their education, regardless of their families' economic and social status. Establish public welfare through unemployment insurance and strong social security systems for all the people who are of the legal age to work or are unable to work. Additionally, provide free education and healthcare for all the people.
12. Normalize foreign relations at the highest levels with all the countries in the world, based on fair relations and mutual respect, ban the acquisition of nuclear weapons, and strive for world peace.

In our opinion, the above minimum demands can be achieved immediately, given the country's potential and actual underground wealth, the presence of informed and capable people and a generation of young people who are motivated to enjoy a happy, free, and prosperous life.

The demands presented in this charter include the general demands of our signatories, and, obviously, we will provide more detail on these demands as we continue our struggle and solidarity.

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